

Bob Sutton

Bob Sutton was born in the hills of Arkansas in 1927 to an industrious and resourceful family, who would continue inspire Bob to make the most of opportunities throughout his life. After several hard years during the Great Depression, Bob's family moved to California in 1942, to seek new opportunities. In 1945 Bob joined the U.S. Merchant Marine, which allowed him to travel and experience the world. In 1955, after returning to California, Bob worked for the Southern Pacific Railroad, where he would stay on for 40 years. During this time Bob took up duck hunting, and he began carving his own decoys in the late 1960s.

After attending regional carving competitions and festivals, Bob was hooked, and began competing with his own birds in the 1970s. Though his decoys won many ribbons—including Best of Show awards for his palm frond carvings, so closely connected to the California landscape—Bob became best known for his work in decoy festivals as an auctioneer and judge. He also led carving associations throughout the country, including as a Board member for the Ward Foundation in its early years. He says, “I get a thrill out of trying to help a show or a carver, more than carving itself.” This passion for serving the carving community has earned him some eight honorary life-time memberships in different decoy or wildlife carving organizations, including in Michigan, Ohio, multiple in California, in Louisiana, and in North Carolina.

In this service capacity, Bob earned a reputation an ingenious fellow. For example, Bob co-created the cocktail category of wildfowl carving while trying to raise funds at the California Open Wildlife Art Festival in the late 1970s. The extraordinarily miniature decoys floated in cocktails he auctioned off at a gala event, and today their unique form continues in cocktail and champagne categories at wildfowl carving festivals throughout the country.

Bob also earned a reputation as a thoughtfully critical judge who holds no punches in decoy evaluations, and whose advice is regularly sought for its truth and wisdom. Further, Bob worked hard—and continues to work—for regulation of judging in the wildfowl competition world. Through the International Wildfowl Carvers Association Bob established a standard set of rules for judging carved wildfowl of different descriptions. Many carving clubs and contests have adopted these rules, and even those that have not officially done so have been influenced by them. For his accomplishments as a carver, auctioneer, inventor, and judge, the Ward Museum is excited to honor Bob Sutton.